

THE INFERNO

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PART TWO : INTO THE SUN

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As the gray chill of fall gave way to the first white snow of winter, Pietr continued to rendezvous with Torral and Shara. They still made him return to the city, and that led to the feeling that he was leading two separate lives. One was filled with trees, herbs, and people who could seemingly change their form, and the other revolved around his cramped room and his job. Some nights as he sat alone in his room he couldn't help but wonder if he'd dreamed his other life up.

But he hadn't. Torral and Shara were real, and the attraction that Pietr felt towards Shara made it hard for him to concentrate on anything else. All too often he'd be thinking of Shara when he should have been listening to Torral. He'd never given her the sculpture, deciding it was too impractical, or told her how he felt. They talked, but only about magic and herbs.

As for his learning, Pietr was making strides despite Shara's distracting beauty. Some skills, like seeing auras, seemed beyond him, while others, like using his mind to help start fires, came naturally. When he wasn't with his friends, he was reading Micklo's books. If he had one regret, it was that he hadn't been more insistent about getting The Void back. Micklo had lost it, and a new copy hadn't come in.

Some nights as he lay in bed Pietr wondered why what little he'd read of The Void had affected him like it had. There'd been allusions to a guiding spirit in it as well as a daemon, and sometimes he wondered if he didn't have both in his life. Ever since his vision of soaring over the sea like a shrell he'd begun to see a large white shrell in both his dreams and the woods. Following it in the woods had helped him find what he was looking for.

But Shara, The Void, and magic weren't the only things Pietr thought about. He also wondered about the father he was trying so hard to be like. In spite of a growing awareness of how his father had lived, Pietr still didn't know much about what his father had been like. Torral wasn't much help. He only said that his former student had been bright and learned very fast.

It was growing frustration with Torral's silence on the subject that led Pietr to seek out his grandfather one night after work. Pietr had stayed away from his grandfather for more than a year, but now he had questions to ask. His mother had warned against such questions, but he no longer cared. If he didn't ask them soon he might not get the chance.

The fear that he might already be too late tugged at Pietr as he entered the neighborhood of low, wooden houses where he'd grown up in. It seemed like only days since he'd walked these streets with their scattered trees and tightly packed cobbles. Painful memories, including his mother's death, welled up as he approached his grandfather's house. He longed for the warmth of a woman's touch.

Pulling his cloak more tightly around him, Pietr stepped up to his grandfather's door. There he paused. The lights were on, but he had to knock several times before he heard someone approach. Then that person was on the other side of the door, and it swung open an inch.

"So, you came back," a familiar, raspy voice said through the crack. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Talk?"

"Yes."

"Well, come in, then. I can't hold this open all night."

"Thank you," Pietr said, stepping into the warm entryway. The smell of hot food reminded him that living here hadn't been all bad. He hadn't always been hungry like he was now. He just hadn't been

able to be himself.

"What did you want to talk about?" an obviously irritated man who looked shorter and more withered than Pietr remembered asked he as closed the door.

"My father," Pietr said, afraid to look the old man in the eye. "I know you didn't like him, but I've been wondering what he was like, and you're the only person I could think of to ask."

"If I didn't like that monster, it was with good reason," the old man said, spitting out his words like shooa seeds. "He was a beast, a dirty, filthy beast. Your mother was young, and he took advantage of her. I was glad when he disappeared."

"I shouldn't have come, then," Pietr said stiffly. "I know you'd rather my mother had loved someone else, but my father was what he was, and I am what I am. I thought that maybe after all these years you'd come to accept that."

"Never! I'll never accept him! Nor will I forgive your mother for wasting her life. I may not be very smart, but my father was, and so was your mother. She could have anyone in this city, but she was too wild. It was all I could do to cover her tracks so you weren't killed."

"You protected me?"

"Of course," the old man said, sounding frail in spite of his bitterness. "You may think I hated you, but I didn't. If I was hard on you, it was for your own good. You're smart like my father, but you're too wrapped up in stupid things like art. I didn't want you to end up like your mother. I wanted you to be strong, so I did what was best."

"But you protected me? You kept my father's identity a secret?"

"Yes."

"What about him? Did you protect him, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you just glad that he disappeared, or did you help it to happen?"

"He left. That's all I know. But by then the damage was done."

"Then I guess there's nothing for us to talk about," Pietr said sadly. "I won't bother you anymore."

"Wait!" the old man said, moving to block Pietr's departure. "I know we didn't get along, that I was harder on you than you think I should have been, but I'm old. I don't have much time left, and I don't want to spend those years thinking my only grandson hates me. I can't tell you what you want to know, but I know someone who can."

"You do?"

"Yes. You remember Morta, your mother's friend from work?"

"Yes."

"Try her. Your mother used to tell her a lot more than she ever told me. If there's one person who'd know about your father, it would be her."

"You're right. I'd forgotten about her."

"And one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Be careful. It doesn't matter that my father was an influential man. If the wrong people find out what you are they'll kill you, and I'd hate to see that. I really would."

"I appreciate your concern. It must be hard for you considering what I am."

"It's not like you think. I don't hate you, just the monster who ruined your mother's life."

"But he's part of me."

"Don't say that! You could be so much more if you wanted to."

"I have to go now," Pietr said, pushing past his grandfather and opening the door. "I want to visit Morta. Does she still live near the packing house?"

"I think so."

"Well, good-bye, then."

"You don't want something to eat?" the old man said, fear now clouding his voice.

"No. I won't bother you anymore."

"That sounds so final."

"I'll see you again when I can."

"Well, good-bye, then."

"Good-bye."

Feeling like a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Pietr took one final look at the man he used to fear and then stepped out into the cold. On the slippery gravel path he shuddered as years of anger spilled out. He felt pity for the old man, but he also felt rage. Why did his only relative have to hate the part of himself he prized most?

Pietr suppressed his anger as best he could and thought about Morta. He wondered if he should seek her out after so many years, but was pretty sure she was someone he could trust. She'd been so nice to him as a child he regretted not having sought her out sooner. Her cheerful nature and homemade breads could have eased the pain of his youth.

Pietr wasn't able to dwell on the matter, for the factory and warehouse district he soon entered was a rough neighborhood. It was the supper hour, but there were still enough figures in doorways and on the street to make him uncomfortable. He'd been attacked in this neighborhood, so it was a while he could focus on the buildings instead of on the hulking figures he passed. When he did finally look at the bleak buildings and smokestacks, he was reminded of why he wanted to leave this dreary town.

Morta's apartment was a low brick structure just beyond a large packinghouse. Pietr found the building easily enough and ducked inside. The tiny glass ornament he remembered was still dangling from her doorframe, so he knocked. He wondered if his mother's friend would recognize him now that he'd grown up.

"Who is it?" a high-pitched voice asked.

"Pietr, Clair's son, I'd like to talk."

"Just a minute."

There was a click, and then the heavy door swung inward to reveal a shorter, plumper woman than the one Pietr expected. Her hair was grayer, too, but her colorful garments were the same. Smelling of strong perfume, she squinted at Pietr and then smiled and beckoned him in. While he was staring at the cloth tapestries that covered the walls, Morta closed and re-locked the door.

"I was beginning to wonder when you'd come," Morta said as the dizzying smells and colors of her living room made Pietr reel.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain, but first let me get you some bread. You look starved"

Pietr smiled. While Morta was limping slightly off to the kitchen, he shed his boots and cloak and then stepped all the way into the living room and sat in one of the thick chairs. When Morta returned with tea and an assortment of breads, he helped her set the tray on the table in the middle of the room and then helped himself to a slice. Seeing that Morta was waiting for him to eat, he took a bite.

"I was beginning to wonder when you'd come," Morta repeated as Pietr swallowed his bread and sipped at his tea. "Your mother left some things here for you here."

"She did?" Pietr said, forgetting his hunger.

"Some of your father's things. She thought they'd be safe with me."

Pietr gasped. He'd been hoping for information about his father. The prospect of actually getting his hands on some things that had belonged to this mysterious man exceeded Pietr's wildest dreams. They would make his father seem far more real.

"I'll get them, but first tell me how you are and what you've been up to. You've changed a great deal."

Containing his impatience as best he could, Pietr described how he'd endured school and life with his grandfather until he'd been old enough to move out. Without telling that he, like his mother, had met someone in the forest, he explained that magic had recently become the focus of his life. He said

that curiosity about his father had prompted him to make this visit. He was surprised to find Morta nodding as though this was what she expected.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you much about your father," Morta said when Pietr finished. "I never met him. I just know he was kind, and that you have his eyes."

"His eyes?"

"That's what your mother said, that they were deep-set like yours and that looking into them was like looking into another world. Tell me, have you noticed anything unusual about yourself lately, any new abilities or talents?"

"Yes, but I don't think you'd understand."

"Don't be so sure. Your mother told me some very strange things."

"What kind of things?"

"About your father, and about herself, too."

"Herself?"

"Yes. She had talents, too, you know. Living in this city was as hard for her as it's been for you. That's why she was drawn to your father, that and the fact that he was a kind man. With parents like them, I'd be surprised if you weren't strange yourself."

"I do seem to have a talent for magic, but I thought it was from my father."

"Not all of it. I can see a great deal of your mother in you, too. Maybe it's easier for you to want to be like your father. He was a man, after all, and a mystery, but you're also like your mother. You have the same restlessness."

"I guess I never really thought of her as being unhappy. She was just my mother."

"Well she was a remarkable person. There's as much of her in you as your father, and perhaps something else, too. I don't know what your talents are, but it's important to keep them hidden. There are people who'd kill you if they knew what you are."

"I know. I also know they killed my father, and I plan to make them pay for their crime."

"Don't say that! Your mother used to talk like that."

"She did?"

"Yes. She was very angry. Try as she did to shield you, I'm afraid she may have passed some of her hate on to you."

"I don't need her for that. There are plenty of people who've made me feel unwanted all by themselves."

"I suppose they have," Morta said, sounding sad. "Go ahead and finish your bread. I'll get your father's things."

While Morta was out of the room for a second time Pietr ate some more bread, but without much enthusiasm. He was too agitated to sit still. Not only was he about to get his hands on some of his father's things, he'd also learned something unsettling about his mother. Could she really have been as hateful as Morta said? It didn't seem possible. She'd always been gentle with him. He was aware of his dark side, but he thought it was from his grandfather, not from his mother. The thought of her wishing ill towards others made him feel strange.

The flimsy box Morta returned with excited Pietr like no other present he'd ever gotten. Barely breathing, he watched as she set the box next to the tray. Still holding his breath, he opened the box. Inside he found a knife, a medicine pouch like Torral and Shara's, and a weathered hide vest. "Mind if I try this on?" he said as he held up the vest, noticing the outline of a shrell on the back. When Morta offered no objection, he stood and slipped the vest on over his shirt.

It fit. Wearing it made Pietr feel like a full-blooded native for the first time in his life. He stood there for a moment adjusting the shirt he had on beneath it and then turned to Morta. "Did my mother say anything when she gave these to you, anything about how they should be used?"

"Only that you'd know. I can sense things about people. It's the gift I have, and I can sense that there are people around you who can help. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"I can also sense that one of them is more than just a friend, that she's like what your father was to your mother. You've found your mate"

Pietr blushed. Hearing Shara spoken of in such an intimate way made him long to be with her. He felt an overpowering urge to be outside making his way back to her. The room, which had seemed cozy moments earlier, now seemed too warm, too full of sweet smells. He had to get out. It was closing in.

So he apologized, thanked Morta, and left as quickly as he could. Back out on the street he found the stench of the packing plant intolerable. Every sensation seemed magnified, from the deafening crunch of the snow beneath his feet to the glow of the streetlights. His vest seemed to be affecting him like an herb. He felt like he was in one of his dreams.

But he wasn't. The air was stinging his lungs, and the two men glaring at him from the end of the street were far too real. As soon as Pietr started in the other direction, they began to close in. When two men appeared at the other end of the street blocking his way, his wariness turned to fear. He tried to seem invisible like he had on several other occasions, but he was too scared. He couldn't make the men go away. Panicking, he ducked into a dark alleyway. When the men reached the alley, they let out a shout. Their prey had disappeared.